

Land, Water And People: Great Lakes' emerging bottomland needs protection

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Oops! Michigan's bottom is showing.

As the Great Lakes drop, their not-so-pretty bottomland emerges, needing the same kind of TLC you'd give freshly exposed skin.

Bottomlands can look and feel slimy, a sort of sand-mud flat with strange decaying plants and other detritus from the lake floor. They're uneven underfoot, pocked with ponds that have to be skirted. Scrubby new flora takes root. In a natural process that humans shouldn't disturb, they adapt for whatever the future brings.

If the lakes stay low, some bottomland will become crucial shoreline wetlands that help filter water. Fish and fowl will move in to set up their nurseries. That's especially critical in Saginaw Bay. Many fish in the Lake Huron system -- which includes Lake St. Clair and the St. Clair and Detroit Rivers -- depend on the bay's health for their own. New plants prevent erosion and shelter wildlife that thrives only in the narrow band where earth meets fresh water.

When and if high water returns, the bottomlands will spring back to life with underwater vegetation ready to resume aquatic duty.

Humans, of course, resent the slow, untidy march of habitat change. In cavalier disdain for the exposed bottomlands -- which are owned by the people of Michigan -- the state House has endorsed their destruction. The bill it passed would allow any owner to flail and churn the fragile bottomland into a smooth, sterile strip. It condones erasure of emergent plants and wetlands, burial for the rich trove of sediment awaiting the next high-water cycle.

Concerned federal and state officials are working furiously on an easy-to-get permit for some acceptable practices, including six-foot wide paths or removable walkways across the bottomland, along with some light mowing. In the meantime, state senators should not disgrace Michigan further with any action that damages the essence of what it means to live in relationship with the lakes.

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